

The Belgian View of the Atlantic Reflex II

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By THB's Frank Gerits.

The Dutch have long considered themselves to be a builder of bridges between Europe and Washington. Europe is important but NATO is still fundamental on the Dutch strategic horizon. The current Minister of Foreign Affairs Maxime Verhagen stated in 2008 that “a strong Atlantic relationship directly serves Dutch interests” [*Internationale Specator*, 62 (Oct 2008)] When confronted with certain issues Dutch diplomats, contrary to the Belgians, thus still have a choice to make: going Atlantic or going European.

The European project is for the Dutch and its politicians a multilateral project, a far cry from the federal utopia the Belgians are pushing for. This cooperation among states can be expanded when needed, but the independent Dutch want to keep their options open. The plebiscite about the European constitution of the first of June 2005 was a more recent example of how the Dutch are rather cool lovers of a federal Europe.

From this comparative perspective, the claim that Dutch foreign policy is guided by a dogmatic Atlantic reflex must be tempered. It is correct that the Belgians made the right decision to condemn the Iraq War, but they did not explore all options. The Dutch, by contrast, thought about their options and believed that supporting the Americans would pay off and chose the Atlantic option. In hindsight it was a wrong choice, but calling that behavior dogmatic is overstated when we compare it with the Belgian decision-making process. The spirit that guided the Dutch decision was *not* the Atlantic Reflex, *but the lack* of a European reflex. If the Dutch government had convincingly promoted the Atlantic alliance, with the vigor that characterizes Belgian adherence to European integration, than one could speak about a genuine reflex.

However what rises up out of the five hundred pages of the Davids Report is the enormous difficulty that accompanied the decision of the Dutch government. Conversely, the Belgian decision to condemn a possible invasion was a cake walk. Consequently the Dutch decision-making process in itself – isolated from its outcome – can be interpreted differently. *Compared to Belgium*, the Dutch thoroughly evaluated all options, and then made the wrong decision. The decision of the Dutch government was not a consequence of too much dogmatism, but too little of it. Especially when we take into account the very flexible way that international law – an idea launched by a Dutchman named Hugo Grotius and embodied by

the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court in The Hague – was interpreted.

Although Belgium made the right decision, it is hard to say if the European reflex will pay off in the future. Nevertheless in a new world where new powers and new economies claim their rightful place at the table, a European reflex, or even a more modest European twitch, seems to be the more successful spasm that small countries such as the Netherlands and Belgium can possess.

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